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Date: February 27, 2022
Sermon: "Here I Am, Lord: Reflections on 56 Years
of Being Called"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-11

But first . . . "Thoughts on Ukraine"

Should today's worship be about the war in Ukraine? In 1983, we were on vacation in Maine, when a Korean civilian airliner was shot down by (well, can you guess which country would shoot down a civilian airliner?) . . .

That Sunday we went to our favorite church, a big-time summer church: outstanding music, great, great preachers. Sixty minutes of glorious worship.

And not a single word about the catastrophic death of innocent people by a Russian wartime aggressor against a planeload of peaceful civilians. Not a word in the sermon. Not even a moment in the prayer. I guess nobody wanted to ruin a lovely summer Sunday.

I mention that because, well, here we are in the same boat. Russia has invaded Ukraine, and, rather overtly threatened other neighboring countries, upsetting and upending everyone and everything.

Do I preach about it? Or half-preach about it? In our pastoral letter on Friday, Alida and I stated the obvious. You don't look to us for geo-political advice or military strategy. Still, as a Church, as pastors, as citizens, we do have a dog in this hunt.

We care, God certainly cares, and it does bear directly on Christianity. At our "Religion in the News" class, we've seen for years that Russian Orthodox Christians and Ukrainian Orthodox Christians have been at one another's throats. Putin has long and loudly proclaimed that he is the last defender of Christian values. It may be baloney, but it has been put in the sandwich and placed on our plate.

I'm *not* inclined to preach about it; or, more truthfully, I'm not *ready* to preach about it. But we will pray about it, have prayed about it, won't

stop praying about it, especially in the terms laid out in our pastoral letter. We wrote:

"You don't look to us for geopolitical advice or military strategy. Our gift to you, our truest purpose, is to always be a place of hope. We are doing funerals this Saturday and next Friday for the express purpose of bringing hope. After 9/11, Sandy Hook, and terrorism in Paris, people filled our Church in search of hope.

People light candles in our sanctuary every day as a symbol of hope. Sundays bring people to Church wanting to be immersed in hope.

We choose Hope.

On behalf of families across Ukraine, protesters and dissidents across Russia, our soldiers stationed across Europe, we choose hope.

On behalf of the Prince of Peace and the God of Love, we choose hope.

On behalf of anyone who is afraid, or angry, or discouraged, we choose hope.

Hope fuels our determination, our courage, our sacrifice, our faith. We choose hope.

We need a lot of hope for the weeks ahead. But like all good things, hope will need to be nurtured, fed, protected, reinforced. Our advice? Choose it. Believe it. Use it. Share it. And strengthen it with prayer.

But if I were to preach about it today, if I were to make a direct connection between our faith and this war, I'd have us think about evil.

Evil is a big deal in the Bible and in religion. You start with the snake lying to Eve to get her to eat the apple. You've got Satan trying to convince Jesus to do business with him, all the way to demon-possession movies like "The Exorcist." We've so caricatured the devil that he's more like a Halloween costume with a red face and a long pointy tail and horns coming out of his head. When truth is, evil is a lot smoother. Much more like Al Pacino as the devil in "The Devil's Advocate," who's a lawyer, smooth-talking and threatening Keanu Reeves to join him. Nice suit. Tough-guy visage. First-class living. Smooth, yes, and diabolical.

There is evil in the world. And there is evil personified, and we need to call it out, call it what it is.

In my book, maybe some sermons too, I tell about the day a young

music student, a promising flautist, she was on the subway platform, and a man in yellow pants pushed her in front of a train. She lived, but her hand was severed, ending her career. The next day, the great newspaper writer Pete Hamill wrote a piece in the *NY Daily News* with the headline: "The Devil Wore Yellow Pants."

There are lots of reasons bad things happen: from luck to genes to timing. But some people choose to do evil. Some choose to be evil. And others choose to allow evil. It's past time to admit what we're facing.

Scripture: Isaiah 6:1-11

A Vision of God in the Temple

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!' And he said, 'Go and say to this people:

"Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking, but do not understand."

*Make the mind of this people dull,
and stop their ears,
and shut their eyes,
so that they may not look with their eyes,
and listen with their ears,
and comprehend with their minds,
and turn and be healed.'*

Then I said, 'How long, O Lord?' And he said: 'Until cities lie waste

*without inhabitant,
and houses without people,
and the land is utterly desolate;*

Sermon: "Here I Am, Lord: Reflections on 56 Years of Being Called"

Two old songs from my past say a thing or two about being "called." The first is from Bob Dylan from back in his very public Christian days.

Covering the full spectrum of humanity, Dylan declares, "[You] Gotta Serve Somebody." At the other extreme is a song from when I was a youth pastor, and part of our ministry was to engage young people in theatre, musicals, from churchy stuff to splashy Broadway.

One was called "For Heaven's Sake" about Christians deciding how seriously to take their faith. The male lead wants to serve God, truly, truly, truly serve God, *and* be popular, do his own thing. And so he sings: "Use me, O, Lord, use me, O, Lord, use me, O, Lord . . . but not just now."

There's the quandary of being "called by God." We all "gotta serve somebody," but when it comes to God's call, maybe we'll get to it later!

The idea of "calling" is all over the Bible.

"Gotta Serve Somebody" – song by Bob Dylan, 1979 (<https://azlyrics.com>)

*You may be an ambassador to England or France
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls*

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody*

*You may be a construction worker working on a home
You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome
You might own guns and you might even own tanks
You might be somebody's landlord, you might even own banks*

*Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk
Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk
You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread
You may be sleeping on the floor, sleeping in a king sized bed*

*But you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody*

There's a person here, and God wants them to go there; there's a person doing this, and God wants them to do that; there's a person living one kind of way, and God wants them to live another kind of way. And more to the point, there's a job that needs doing, and God has decided you're the one to do it.

In this way, God is no different from the rest of us. We've all had people we are responsible for: maybe as parents or grandparents; or as teachers, coaches; or a boss or the chair of a board or committee; a team captain, a public servant. And in those situations, there are times we have to get someone's attention. Maybe they're not listening. Maybe they're distracted or disinterested. Maybe they're busy doing something else. So what do you do?

Well, you can call their name, gently prod them, yell, push, get in their face, threaten, demand, entice, appeal, reward, cry. You name it, we try it, God tries it.

This Sunday and again in two weeks, I'm reflecting on a long life of doing ministry. It began with my "calling" 56 years ago, and my ordination 50 years ago, which Alida says is a big deal, but in my family it's no big deal.

My grandfather was never ordained. Never went to high school. But he was a pastor for 60 years, till age 80. My father preached his first sermon at age 12 and stayed at it till 86—that's 74 years! So 50 is just a step along the way.

Today, my emphasis is on being "called," something we all are but may not use that word for it.

I've always been intrigued by carpenters. Jesus was a carpenter. His father, Joseph, was a carpenter. My grandfather was a carpenter and a pastor at the same time, all those 60 years. He literally built one church with his own hands, Monday through Friday, and with his ministry on the weekends.

Me? I took Woodshop for three years and could see that it wasn't my calling. But I'm awed by good carpenters, so I've asked many how they first knew they wanted to be a carpenter. Some say it was the first time

they touched wood. Or smelled sawdust. Or made something that somebody else liked. It clicked.

All that can be applied to just about any “calling.” Some people love numbers. Machines. Technology. Painting. Fixing things. Baking, cooking, healing, teaching. Playing. Singing. Helping.

I’ll get to the more spiritual in a minute, but at its most basic, here’s my definition of “calling”: when your gifts, talents, interests match up with an opportunity that needs your gift, talent, or interest. It can be a one-time thing. Or a lifetime thing. But if you’ve got the ability to do it, and the opportunity to do it, there’s your call to do it. Don’t overcomplicate it. Consider yourself “called.”

That’s why today’s Scripture is perfect for telling you about this idea of calling—all the pieces are there. First, there is an eye-catching “aha moment,” something that makes you take notice.

Isaiah was already a priest serving in the magnificent Solomon’s Temple. Thousands of people counted on him for their religious life. It was a pretty big deal. In ancient Judaism he was a guy who stood between you and God. What’s extra interesting is that Isaiah was born into it. God wanted something more intentional, so God put on a show, loud, majestic, visual, awesome.

There are these strange heavenly beings, each with six wings flying around the inner sanctum of the Temple, praising God to such a degree that the Temple shakes. The place is full of smoke and incense and burning coals, and most amazing of all, God is there—massive, overwhelming, and intimidating. All to see if Israel would take notice, respond, or ignore.

Some calls begin that way, not all, but some. I think probably because we all need different levels of the persuading. Some see the right thing to do and do it. Some know what they’re meant for and get at it. Some are resistant, skeptical, otherwise engaged. Oblivious. Self-centered. All of the above, like me.

Which means some of us need a little more persuasion. That’s when God may bring out the drama, the object lesson, the two-by-four, yes, even the dreams, the visions, the voices . . . or a sledgehammer. Isaiah gets it all.

So, the second lesson from the Scripture is Isaiah takes notice. He is alert enough, open enough, spirited enough to take the whole experience seriously. He could have walked away or explained it away. He doesn't. Whatever God was up to, Isaiah stands there and takes it in.

My story is well known. It's in at least three of my books. Easily 20 sermons. Maybe 100 Bible classes. The Confirmation class knows it by heart. Every troubled teenager I meet with has had to hear it: David Johnson Rowe, the James Dean of Queens, leather jacket, pack of cigarettes in my rolled-up T-shirt sleeve, gang member at 12 . . . wayward youth, stripped of my Boy Scout leadership, kicked out of boarding school and college.

My father got me a summer job giving away free Bibles, door to door, hand to hand. One gig had me on the Coney Island Boardwalk. You know the "Tracy Lee" short story I preached about a month ago? Well, Coney Island happened about a month later. Taken together, "Tracy Lee" and my Coney Island Boardwalk days are a key lesson about "calling." It can be a process, a two-step process, a two-year process, a two-era process.

I'd say my experience with the mysterious "Tracy Lee" on the streets of Brooklyn softened my hard ground. Got me ready to be turned over.

So, there I am on the Boardwalk, in hot July. I can see myself clearly, slouched over, long hair, surly and bored—always a delightful combination—going up to total strangers with their arms full of beach chairs, sunscreen, beer, and ice cream and Nathan's Famous hot dogs, and I push a Bible into their hands. I was the anti-Mormon.

Then God goes to work with a sledgehammer. People spat at me. Cursed me. Punched me. And here's the drama part: some folks took the Bible, went to the beach, came back hours later, hugged me, kissed me, gave me money. Yeah, that got my attention.

I was raised in a Christian home, brought up in the church. Sunday School, Vacation Bible School. I was the preacher's kid, after all. I knew all that religion stuff, I figured.

Now, on that Boardwalk, with complete strangers hating on me and complete strangers loving me, all because of that Bible, maybe I didn't know all that much. Maybe it was time I did. Maybe, maybe . . . well, lots of maybes. Maybe there is a God. Maybe I should talk to him. Maybe I should listen. Maybe I "gotta serve somebody" other than my own self. Maybe I should get my act together. Maybe God's "calling" me.

A lot of this was going on in my head. A lot of it out loud. A lot of it in the dark, alone, a lot of it on the Boardwalk where folks must have thought I was crazy.

My guess is that Isaiah went through the same. Once God got Isaiah's attention, then Isaiah learns what's ahead. First, he hears God talking to himself, thinking out loud, working something out.

"Whom shall I send?" God wonders. "Who will go for us?" That image of God ruminating—I love that. Can you imagine how much of the world must make God scratch his head? Perplexed. Annoyed. "Who'll speak up?" "Who'll stop the madness?" "Who'll work with me?" God wonders or fumes.

The Bible is 3,000 years of recorded history. And that Bible, the book of our faith, matches up with the books of other faiths that are full of stories: stories of people who respond to God, saying, "yes," and stories of people saying, "no." Or, "not just now." Or, "anything but that." Or, "you must be crazy." Or, "get out of my head." Stories of God, ruminating, calling.

That's how you get a Buddha. That's how you get Jesus's disciples and Mary and St. Paul. That's how you get a St. Francis, Martin Luther, Mother Teresa, Martin Luther King, Jr.

That's how you get that Ukrainian woman who stopped a truckload of Russian soldiers and asked them to go home.

Some people hear God talking out loud and then, like Isaiah, they hear themselves, saying boldly, "Here am I, send me!"

Then comes the final lesson about calling: the job description. We clergy love to talk about being "called." It's our excuse for everything we do. But I notice we are never "called" to a smaller church or a lesser salary. And me, I always expected God to "call" me to a sunny state, a warm climate. But, no. I got offers from St. Paul, Minnesota; way upstate New York; Pittsfield, Massachusetts; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. So the calling thing gets played.

But Isaiah took it to heart, and I've tried. The job description for him was, well, complicated. God told him to go to his nation, his fellow citizens, his neighbors, and tell them, "Your heart is hard, your eyes are useless, your ears are clogged, your head is empty." God's just getting warmed up. He goes on, "I am going to lay waste to your country till the cities are ruined,

the houses are deserted, the fields, ravaged; the land, forsaken . . . and then I'll do it again."

Now you know why people don't like prophets, whether old-time or new-time. Nobody likes to hear what they're doing wrong—not about themselves, not about their country.

And not everyone is "called" to be a doomsday prophet. That's why I'll close with one more story about getting fired. You always like those, and it furthers my point that calling can be a process.

So, yes. I got the sledgehammer conversion. I got called to ministry. I got my life turned around. I became a good student. I go to seminary, and by my second year I'm Youth Pastor of a thriving Congregational church in Bedford, Massachusetts. I've gone from being the James Dean of Queens to the Alida Ward of Massachusetts. Huge youth group. All sorts of edgy, black-light, rock 'n' roll youth programs.

When the city needed help with youth, I got called. During the Vietnam War protests sweeping through schools, the Police Chief and School Superintendent asked me to get in the middle and keep it peaceful. I did.

The next week, the Senior Pastor fired me. I was too controversial. Too hot to handle. Of course, you're getting only my side of the story, which is the only side I know, so I invite you inside my head at that time.

This is me back then. God calls me in 1966. I say, "Here am I, send me." I start seminary in 1968. Churches hire me. It's going great. By 1969, I'm fired. I'm blacklisted. The Denomination tells me to keep my head down, my mouth shut, and don't make waves.

Well, the heck with this, I thought; the heck with the whole calling, seminary, ministry, church baloney, I thought.

I was disgusted. But I had bills to pay, only one year left of seminary, why waste all that, I thought. So I drove one day to my seminary, and I said to God, out loud, really, *really* out loud, "Listen, God. I'm going to look at the employment bulletin board. If there is a church looking for a seminarian no farther than 10 miles from my door, paying \$75 a week, I'll do it. Otherwise, I'm done. You want me, you do it."

Well, there was only one job opening on the board. One little ad for a seminarian, \$75 a week, the Trinitarian Congregational Church, North

Andover, Massachusetts, 10 miles from my front door.

I walked in there for the interview, even longer-haired, even more surly, definitely angry, cynical, beaten up, bloodied by phony Christianity.

And they hired me. For the next nine months, only nine months, that church, those kids, their families, the Board and Committee, and dear, dear, dear Rev. Herbert Schumm, all they did was love me. Tenderly, patiently, love me. They bound up my wounds. They made me believe in church again. They helped me hear my calling again.

Rev. Schumm was the anti-David Rowe. Tall, very proper, elegant, highly intellectual, more German than all the great German theologians, and more deep.

More than anything, he and his church were pure love. *Pure love*. I doubt I did them any good in those nine months. I was in no shape emotionally or spiritually to help anybody. A bitter wreck is not generally a good hire.

But they paid me my \$75, loved me purely, picked me up off the ground, dusted me off, and when I was ordained in October, 1971, it was Rev. Schumm's ordination prayer that completed the process.

"Here he is, Lord, send him."

And here I am, thanks to their call.

Amen

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